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ABSTRACT

The value priorities of students engaged in teacher education programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels were studied. The research attempted a qualitative analysis in order to interpret quantitative results previously obtained and reported. Three research topics guiding the study were: the value priorities of undergraduate and graduate students as measured by the Rokeach Value Survey and whether or not they were consistent with those of students previously enrolled in the same educational programs; how the students interpret the meaning of the values; and why the values are important to students. Results indicate that the value priorities of students in the study remain similar if not identical to those assessed on the same instrument in a previous study. The value for "self-respect" remains the most frequently selected value among students in the present study. Students placed importance on the instrumental values "honest" and "responsible" and reported a perceived relationship between those values. A knowledge and understanding of the value priorities of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in teacher education programs and the meaning those values have for students may provide faculty with motivational insights and strategies for meeting their learning needs. Contains 11 references. (SM)

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The Meaning and Importance of Values to Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to describe the value priorities of students engaged in teacher education programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels. More specifically, the present research attempted a qualitative analysis in order to interpret quantitative results previously obtained and reported. The Rokeach Value Survey and group interviews were conducted in order to determine value priorities, value meaning and perceived value importance.

Previous research over the past decade (Rokeach, 1979; Feather, 1975; Drenan, 1983; Linder, et al. 1988) has shown a consistent trend in the value priorities of students in higher education as assessed by the Rokeach Value Survey (1973). On both the Terminal and Instrumental value scales of the Survey specific values consistently emerge at the top of the list. Rokeach (1973) has shown that value patterns differ among older as compared to younger persons. While this has been confirmed in our own research (Linder et al., 1985) there still persisted strongly held values that were not age or gender specific.

The focus of the present study was to describe the value priorities of students engaged in teacher education programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels. More specifically, the present research attempted a qualitative analysis in order to interpret quantitative results previously obtained and reported. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the value priorities of undergraduate and graduate students as measured by the Rokeach Value Survey and are these values consistent with those of students previously enrolled in the same educational programs?
2. How did students interpret the meaning of these values?
3. Why were these values important to students?

Method

Subjects were students enrolled in two graduate level courses (N = 21) and one undergraduate course (N = 24) in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University during the Spring, 1988 semester.

A two part survey was administered to each class by this researcher. Part I requested demographic information regarding age, gender, major and work experience. Part II consisted of the Rokeach Value Survey which included the Terminal and Instrumental value scales. According to Rokeach (1973) Terminal values are worthy life goals or end states (e.g., Self-respect) and Instrumental values are the means by which we obtain these goals (e.g., Honest). Students were instructed to rank their top 4 values from among the 18 Terminal values and to do the same with the 18 Instrumental values. These data were tabulated and organized in terms of frequencies and percentages and are presented below.

A tape recorded group interview was conducted by this researcher in each class immediately following the written survey. The questions asked of students were:

1. What are your Terminal value rankings? Your Instrumental value rankings?
2. How did you interpret the meaning of the values you selected?
3. Why are these values important to you?

Each tape recorded class session was analyzed by this researcher in order to specifically answer questions 2 and 3 above.

Results

Terminal and Instrumental Value Rankings

The data regarding the Terminal values scale indicated that "Self-Respect" was ranked most frequently (51% of the time) by all students (N = 45) as one of their top four values. Students ranked "Honest" most frequently (60% of the time) among their top four Instrumental values. These results are similar to those obtained by Linder et al.(1985).

Graduate students (N = 21) ranked "Self-Respect" among their top four Terminal values 67% of the time and ranked "Honest" 62% of the time. Undergraduates (N = 24) split their top four Terminal value rankings between "Self Respect" and "Family Security." Both values were mentioned 38% of the time. However, undergraduates ranked "Honest" among their top four Instrumental values 58% of the time and "Responsible" 50%.

Other Terminal and Instrumental values that were frequently mentioned by students but did not receive statistical majorities were "Happiness," "Freedom," "Loving," "Independent" and "A Sense of Accomplishment."

Group Interview Data

An analysis of the group interviews revealed that the value "Self-Respect" was interpreted by students as meaning Self-Esteem. This definition is provided along with the Terminal Value Scale and students in all classes reported interpreting the value in this way. The importance students attributed to "Self-Respect" centered around an expressed need for more self- esteem in their lives. As one graduate female student put it, "If you lost it it's very important to get it back." "It is important

to one's well-being." Students who did not rank "Self-Respect" so highly gave as their reasons for doing so, "I already possess it," "I take it for granted."

Many students reported that other Terminal values such as "A Sense of Accomplishment" and "Happiness" were related to their value for "Self-Respect." Students during class discussions often used the descriptors provided with the value scale when expressing their value priorities. For example, female graduate students in two different classes described the importance of "A Sense of Accomplishment" as meaning "making a lasting contribution."

The Instrumental value "Honest" was interpreted by students according to and consistent with the descriptor provided on the value scale. Most students who expressed their importance for this value did so by relating it to themselves. For example, one female graduate student said, "I need to be honest with myself so I can be with others." A male graduate student talked about "Personal honesty, but I see a lack of it around." Other students perceived the importance of this value as reserved for close relationships with special people like family or intimate friends.

The Instrumental value "Responsible" was frequently mentioned by students. Female undergraduate and graduate students said that being "dependable" was related to being honest while another female undergraduate disagreed. "You could be honest but be late for work!" A male graduate student who interpreted "Responsible" according to the scale's definition reported, "If you see a lack of dependability and reliability then you value it." Another male undergraduate thought it was important to be responsible "To others."

Discussion

The value priorities of students in the present study remain similar if not identical to those assessed on the same instrument in a previous study (Linder et al., 1985). Indeed, the value for "Self-Respect" remains the most frequently selected value among students in the present study and, as reported by Drenan (1983), for Americans as a whole. This value was interpreted by students as meaning Self-Esteem which was consistent with the instrument's definition. Furthermore, students placed importance on this value because of a reported felt need to acquire more of it in their lives. Thus it might be said that people value that which is most important to them but which they least have--- a conclusion derived at by Furnham (1984) and Ball-Rokeach (1984) regarding "Self-Respect."

Students in the present study placed importance on the Instrumental values "Honest" and "Responsible." Their reported reasons for doing so revolved around a personal need for these values especially toward and from significant others such as family members and intimate friends. This personal or private concern for these values has also been documented by Cochran (1985).

Students reported a perceived relationship between the values discussed above. This relationship between values e.g., Self-Respect and A Sense of Accomplishment, was also reported by Drenan (1983).

It should be noted that the very nature of ranking values on the Rokeach Survey has been found to be a valid and reliable method to determine value choice (Miethe, 1985) but not necessarily perceptions of value importance (Thompson et al., 1982). With this in mind it is

suggested that further research regarding the meaning and importance of values be conducted in both a qualitative as well as quantitative way.

Conclusion

A knowledge and understanding of the value priorities of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in teacher education programs and the meaning these values have for students may provide faculty with motivational insights and strategies for meeting their learning needs. Teacher educators serve as role models both in the way they teach as well as what they teach. Becoming a responsible, honest and competent professional is one way to achieve a sense of self-esteem.

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